

The Landscape and Gaps of Parent Education and Engagement in [city]*

[HGSE students – names removed]

May 2nd, 2018

1 Introduction

The idea that a person's early childhood experiences can shape their later lives is not new (Kermack et al., 1934). In fact, research suggests that early childhood education can shape both a young person's social skills as well as cognitive skills, and that these effects persist throughout people's later lives (Weiland and Yoshikawa, 2013; Deming, 2009; Heckman et al., 2010). For example, a recent paper argues that replacing the lowest performing kindergarten teachers with an average teacher increases the lifetime income of students in the classroom by \$250,000 (Chetty, et al. 2014).

The specific factors that shape young people's early childhood experiences range from childcare arrangements, to safety, and parent engagement. In [city], [the Program] at [the Organization] has identified parent education and engagement as one of the most vital challenges in supporting the parents of young people in the city. They want to know: 1) What does the current landscape of parent education and engagement in the city currently look like? And, 2) What are the greatest challenges for parent education and engagement today?

To respond to these questions, we employ a mixed methods approach, combining semi-structured stakeholder interviews with extensive survey data. Building from the analysis of this data, we provide an overview of the existing services for young parents in the city and identify the most pressing challenges regarding parent education and engagement.

In response to the first research question, we find that:

- Existing parent engagement activities in [city] are most commonly parent education workshops and parent-child activities, rather than parent support groups.

*This paper was written for [the Program], a part of [the Organization].

†[student emails removed]

- These parent education workshops and parent-child activities cover a wide range of purposes and topics and mainly cover brain and child development, parenting, play, and language/literacy.

In response to the second question, we find that:

- Housing and Childcare affordability are major concerns for parents.
- It's difficult to know the full scope of parent engagement activities in [city].
- Providers need to work on their cultural sensitivity and awareness to better serve families in [city].

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We provide a sketch of the context our research took place in. Next, we discuss the methods we use to collect our data and in our analysis. Then, we outline our results. We discuss further directions for research as well as possible limitations of our study. Finally, we conclude and provide recommendations for moving forward.

2 Context

The research conducted by our team over the course of the semester relates to [the city's] long-term goals of ensuring all children in [city] receive high-quality education and care. In February 2014, the [local task force] was created and charged with the task of developing a set of recommendations to (a) improve early education and care throughout the community, and (b) ensure that all children receive high quality early education and care beginning with prenatal care and extending through third grade ([local task force], 2015). A strong body of research shows that meaningful engagement with parents supports school readiness and later academic success (Mapp & Henderson, 2007).

To leverage this critical role that families play in children's development, [the Program's] Family Engagement and Partnership Action Plan outlined the following goal: "Increase opportunities for families to engage in parenting education activities and increase availability of high quality materials and resources: (FEP Action Plan, 2017). In order to address this goal, they needed to conduct an inventory of all the parenting education opportunities to "assess the gaps, needs, and overlaps: and also acquire feedback from key stakeholders in the city, such as health care and safety providers, regarding parent/caregiver needs (FEP Action Plan, 2017). The research completed by our team this past semester will accomplish these goals for [the Program].

3 Methods

Our companion site originally approached us asking if we wanted to use survey or interview data for our project. [The Organization] had already created a survey and was ready to send it out, so we decided to compile results

from that survey along with conducting our own interviews to inform our final recommendations.

3.1 Survey

The population of the participants who took the survey were organizations that were already providing specific parent education workshops, parent/child spaces, and parent support groups. This included schools, libraries, nonprofits, and child and family centers. This survey asked providers to describe those activities to get a better idea of all the programs available and happening in [the city]. Participants of the survey answered questions about how often the activity happened, the focus of the activity (i.e. child development, language/literacy, play etc.), and who led the activity. This questions broadened the information [the Organization] had about the organizations and their programs that served families.

3.2 Interviews

The population of the participants who were interviewed for this project were primary stakeholders in [the city] who work with families directly and consistently, but not in the realm of explicit parent education. We wanted to speak with people who had different roles with families but were still working with them enough to understand their needs.

We worked in conjunction with [the Organization] to determine who in the community could provide us with information about parent needs. We began with a list of eight people to reach out to, however we were only able to interview seven of them. The initial e-mail was sent by a city official to help us as researchers establish legitimacy, and then we followed up with them for interview times. Here is a brief description of the interviewees:

- The Title I Family Liaison for [local] Public Schools: Though they describe their role first and foremost as a parent and grandparent, their "city roles, include being a Baby University support worker, which they do for about 10 hours per week and a Homeless Outreach Worker, an additional position they applied to under their Title I position.
- A junior kindergarten teacher at [local school]: They have been a teacher in [the city] since 1964 and began as a fourth grade teacher.
- The Director of Resident Services at the [local] Housing Authority: They have been working at the [housing authority] for many years, and have lived in the city since before their children were born. Though they are from outside the state, their own daughter went to the [local] Public Schools - so they know the city and the education system from their own experience.
- The police officer in charge of the Youth Services Unit: They have police stationed at schools, and they

take care of police calls when young people are involved. They grew up in public housing in [the city], and love and know the people they work with in the school. With their own children in the school system, they are invested in the city's services.

- The director of [the city's] Economic Opportunity Committee: Has lived and worked in the city for decades, and has come to build relationships with many of the families they work with as well as many of the providers of services around the city.
- Pastor of [a local] Methodist Episcopal Church: Also serves as the lead minister of teaching and preaching. Their main interaction with families is offering pastoral guidance. There is also a school that rents out space in the church's office building; they interact with families there intermittently as well.
- Pediatrician, Medical Director of School Health and Public Health Programs in the [local] Public Health Department, and Medical Director of [Program]: Their main interaction with families is as their child's doctor. Their capacities in the [the local housing agency] are more policy directed.

The person who did not respond to our request for an interview was someone working with [another Program].

Since our interviews served, in part, to identify challenges in the city, it was important for us to build trust with our interviewees. And, as Maxwell (2005) observes, the interview process is more than about gaining access to information through the opportunity to interview them, but it is, itself, a process built on trust.

3.3 Analysis

For the survey data, we used the percentages and charts provided to us through the Survey Monkey data analysis feature. The questions we chose to include in our final analysis were those that most directly answered our first research question and provided additional support to our interview questions.

For the analysis of our interviews we used descriptive coding to find common themes and organized those themes by frequency in a data matrix. Figure 3 in our Findings section outlines these six challenges to parent education that interviewees identified.

We would like to take a moment here to comment on any bias we may have experienced during interviews. While conducting interviews over the phone and in person, we realized that the environments we were in played a big role in how we conducted the interview. For example, for those of us that did phone interviews, we reported feeling more formal and directive in our interviewing technique. Because there was no way to read nonverbal behavior, some analysis in those interviews may have been lost. On the other hand, in the interviews that were done in person, the exterior environment had an effect on how both the interviewer and interviewee perceived the interaction. For instance, the interview inside the police precinct felt more formal and structured than an

interview that was in a classroom, or a [local] restaurant. We wanted to bring this up because it is clear that our comfortableness in the environment we were in shaped some of the information that we received from our interviewees, and other non-verbal cues may have shaped our interpretation of the information.

4 Findings

In this section of the paper, we group our findings by the two research questions we ask: 1) What does the current landscape of parent education and engagement in the city currently look like? And, 2) What are the greatest challenges for parent education and engagement today?

To answer the first question, we rely primarily on survey data, and present these answers briefly before turning to the second question. In contrast, in responding to the second research question we rely primarily on our in depth stakeholder interviews. While the survey data help to provide a foundation for and inform our research, the emphasis of this project is on the interviews we conducted in response to the second question.

4.1 RQ1) What does the current landscape of parent education and engagement in the city currently look like?

4.1.1 Survey Data

Parent engagement activities take the form of parent-child activities, parent education workshops, and parent support groups (see Appendix 7.3). Parent education workshops and parent-child activities appeared to be the most frequent types of activities offered, while parent support groups were far less represented as a source of support for parents.

Figure 1 shows the top six buckets that providers identified their program focused on. A full version of the graph with all answers can be found in the appendix. The figure shows that the most common parent engagement activities revolve around child development. Other topics of concern to [the Program], like stress management and advocacy/negotiation training workshops were less frequent topics. 23% of providers and approximately 6% of providers, respectively, focused on these specific themes. While programming for dads was not particularly popular according to the survey, according to one individual we interviewed, workshops tailored to dads were gaining traction in the city.

The survey data shows that workshops and activities are offered as both standalone activities and as a series. These programs were offered at different times during the week, but most popular during mornings and evenings.

4.1.2 Stakeholder Interviews

Our stakeholder interviews suggest that the early childhood education landscape in [the city] is character-

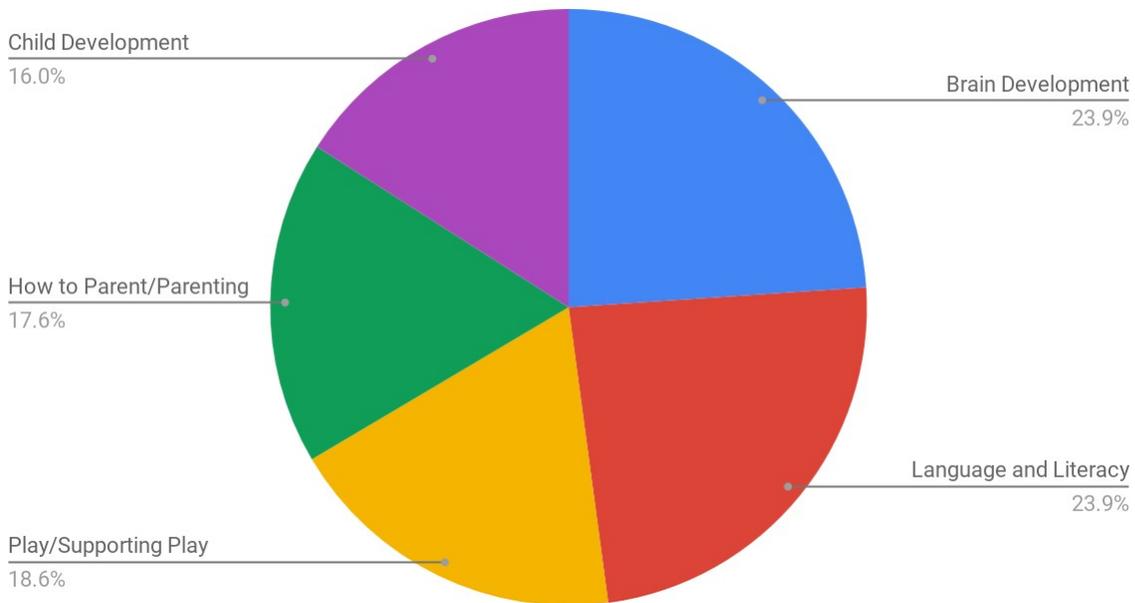
ized by a wealth of resources. For example, the pediatrician commented "how many do you want me to talk about?: before responding to questions about programs that currently exist in [the city]. The resources identified by our interviewees are listed in Table 6 in the Appendix.

While this marks an obvious strength of the services in the city, it can be challenging to navigate the complex array of services available. As the director at the [city's] Economic Opportunity Committee explains: a challenge in the city is that there is a surplus of resources, but it's hard to know what's out there - even with [online resource] it's not easy.

Two interviewees mentioned [a third Program] as a good program for parents to learn more about their role as parents in their child's development. The programs that already exist are quality programs, and people who work with families know which ones work.

Figure 1:

The main purposes of existing parent engagement activities



4.2 RQ2) What are the greatest challenges for parent education and engagement today?

4.2.1 Survey Data

Before launching into the in-depth analysis of interviews, we provide one example of a challenge for the city

that jumps out from the survey data. Figure 2 is composed of the survey responses of parent education service providers in the city. As we will see through the more in depth stakeholder interviews, few parent education providers provide services in languages other than English.

Figure 2:

Q9 Do you offer this parenting education workshop/support group/parent-child activity in languages besides English?

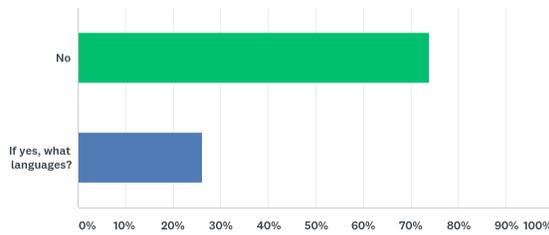
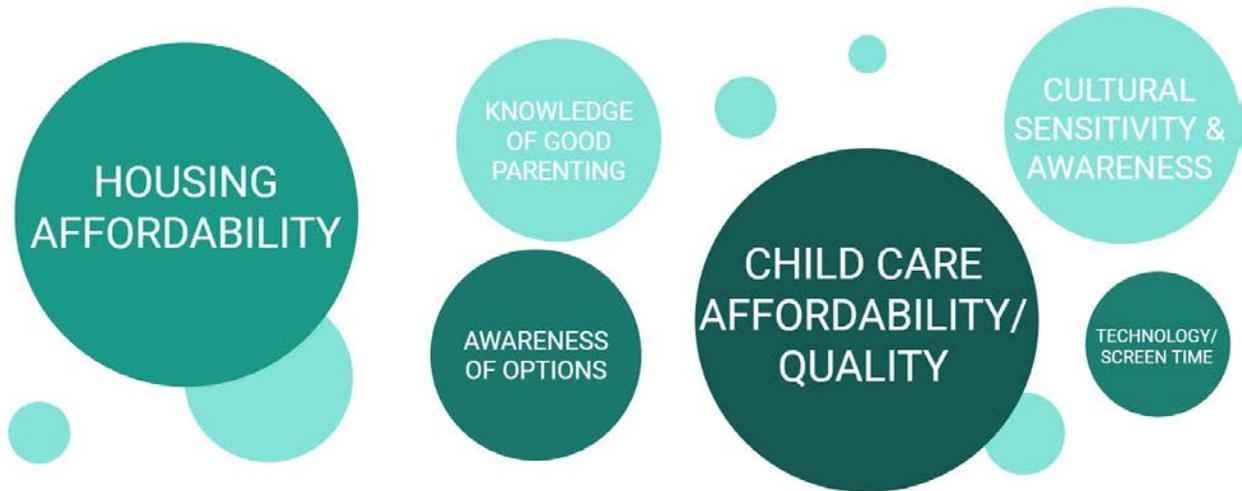


Figure 3:



4.2.2 Stakeholder Interviews

Figure 3 identifies the six themes for challenges that came up most frequently in our stakeholder interviews: childcare affordability and quality, housing affordability, cultural sensitivity and awareness, awareness of opportunities, knowledge of good parenting, and technology/screen time. Each of these six themes will be discussed in more depth below - tying together the perspectives of several stakeholders.

Housing Affordability

The issue of affordable housing was a major theme across nearly all our interviews. As the Title I Family Liaison put it, "I think housing is a big issue for families in need and even with affordable housing that we have, I don't think it's enough. I don't think it's really affordable for some families and I think, you know, we may need more 3, 4-bedroom units and I guess, middle income families, even for them it's a struggle. While the issue of housing may not be traditionally thought of as a typical parenting education topic, it is such a foundational, basic need for families that it is important to take into context when thinking about engaging with families.

The director of the [city's] Economic Opportunity Committee echoed this point: without subsidies it is almost impossible for many families to move to or stay in [the city], and when they do succeed in staying in the city, the cost of housing puts a drain on their resources.

For families in Section 8 housing, the Title I Family Liaison felt strongly that families needed more hand holding. They explain:

"There has to be some system in place to help, you know, and I'm just talking about the housing, but to help families understand, um, you know, these are the things that, you know, you have an apartment, you've got an apartment and rent is due and these things are due. If you miss your rent, you know, your due date...that we can take it to court. This is how we take you to court. These are the things that, you know, the piece of mail, this is what it will look like. It's not enough to just have it in writing or even having like, I I'm going to quickly tell you, I I you know? I think it's, it's gotta be more than that.:

One approach to this might be to focus on financial literacy more broadly. For example, the Junior Kindergarten teacher suggested parents could benefit from more financial literacy and budgeting workshops.

Childcare Affordability and Quality

Another common theme in our interviews was the challenge parents faced in finding affordable, high-quality child care. Though it was acknowledged that there were scholarship programs available, this was still viewed as far too limited. This appears to be a well-recognized issue, as over 50% of the parenting education providers that participated in the survey offer child care.

Although they believe the availability of childcare programs is increasing through stipends, the director of youth services at the [local] Housing Authority highlighted the variance in quality between childcare programs in the city. And, when families do not receive stipends for childcare, they have to hobble together resources from any other sources available to them - including relatives and close community members.

The pastor remarked that one of the biggest challenges facing new parents in [the city] is finding good, quality early childhood education. While there are options for childcare in [the city], in naming this as a challenge, the pastor wanted to emphasize the act of parents choosing a place to send their child. There are not as many resources available for parents to help them make an informed decision about their child's early education.

Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

Describing the strengths of the [city's] Economic Opportunity Committee, the director explains that their staff speak Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Amharic. We hear the same point from our interview with the stakeholder at the [local] Housing Authority: "The main obstacle is language... We have to translate our announcements to at least 4 or 5 languages and have translators present at our

meetings. Together with the responses from the surveys shown in Figure 2, our interviews further highlight the need to deliver services in multiple languages.

The rich cultural landscape of the city also comes with other challenges. As the police officer we interviewed explains, there can be a culture clash between immigrant kids and their families - where the kids want to assimilate and pull away from the culture and norms of their family.

This issue of cultural sensitivity also came up as a potential barrier to parents not participating or engaging with parent education resources because they may not feel welcomed in [the city]. One individual felt particularly strong about the fact that businesses or agencies are not always particularly welcoming to people of color or immigrants. "I've seen things that are just not OK. You know, and you turn off somebody and then that's it. Providers need to think about these issues of mistrust and think about how to engage parents differently based on people's prior experiences in the city.

Awareness of Options

Both the survey options and interviewee responses point to the issue of parents not being aware of opportunities in [the city], instead of particular gaps in services or topics. As previously discussed, parenting education activities cover a wide set of issues. Stakeholders remained concerned that parents simply do not have the information needed to take advantage of existing resources. The junior kindergarten teacher shared,

"I think some parents may not realize that they have interpreters for every language you can imagine in [the city]. I don't think the parents sometimes know of the opportunities that they can avail themselves of. I think [the city] really does an outstanding job trying to reach out to parents.:

This point was reiterated by other stakeholders as well. At the [city's] Housing Authority, one stakeholder explains that "Awareness is also key - a constant battle, and at the [city's] Economic Opportunity Committee, a director suggests that they have to think about not just expecting families to come to them, but to get the information directly to the families. This was also echoed by the family liaison coordinator,

"We have to be creative in thinking about how to...how do we do that? What does engagement really mean and how can we let families know what it really means? I don't think we can sit

back and wait for them to come to us. That's just not going to be possible. You have to go out in the community and you have to send the right people to go out to the community to do that as well.:

Knowledge of Good Parenting Practices

More than simply increasing awareness, other stakeholders suggest that efforts to increase parent engagement have to first get parents to buy-in. The police officer we interviewed explains that "how to get parents to buy in, that seems to be the tipping point:, but acknowledges that getting parents to change behavior is difficult. This can be particularly challenging when the parents are dealing with difficult situations in their own lives. It can be difficult for these parents to find time to spend with their kids. And, as the director at the [city's] Economic Opportunity Committee explains, this point is exacerbated by financial pressures: "Financial stress is a challenge, and with people working many jobs it's hard for parents to spend time with their children:. Further, the police officer explains that they do not always have experiences in their own lives that model good parenting practice.

The pastor also remarked on the phenomenon of good parent practice. While they know that the Parenting Journey is a good program for parents to be a part of, they know that their families still struggle sometimes: "No one gives you a manual on how to do this [parenting].:

It's a reminder that even with copious amounts of programs and services aimed to help parents, it can still be a difficult journey.

Technology and Screen Time

One of the less common topics addressed by current parent education opportunities in the city revolved around technology and screen time. The junior kindergarten teacher framed it as an issue of children spending time away from their parents.

"I think parents need help in how to raise their child like we all do in this society. And there is so much stimulus and so much talk and everything on television is way beyond children's years. I think parents need help because I think parents are so busy and so tired when they get home from work that children are spending so much time on television being exposed to things that they shouldn't be.:

These same ideas came up in our interview with the police officer who explained that some of the information on the internet can be harmful for young children, and with kids more savvy than their parents in using technology, parents are often unaware of what their children are consuming on the screens. The pediatrician also mentioned screen time as a big concern for developing children, also saying that in tandem with our growing reliance on screens, that children have a "lack of opportunity for physical activity.:

5 Discussion

In this section we begin by considering possible limitations to our study, before bringing together our findings, suggesting possible paths forward in tackling existing challenges.

One of the limitations of our research and analysis was the format of the survey. Question 28 asks providers if they offer any additional parent education workshops, parent-child activities, or support groups. If yes, respondents were essentially asked to answer the same set of 26 questions on another program offering. While 46 providers said that they do, in fact, offer additional services, less than half of this group continued the survey at all and if they did, skipped more questions. This survey respondent attrition limits our understanding of the full scope of existing parent engagement activities in the city. Our analysis primarily focused on the first 27 set of questions and we assumed that in answering the survey, respondents had their primary or most popular parent engagement offering in mind.

Another limitation of our study is that we were limited to the seven voices that participated in our interviews. These voices included a diverse set of stakeholders but omitted some important perspectives: for example, those of families themselves. That said, while it was not reasonable, given time constraints, to reach all possible stakeholder groups, we feel comfortable with our set of interviews, as we heard many themes repeated over and over again.

Of the six buckets of challenges identified in the interviews, some can be solved through specific programming, whereas the others are broader challenges that require coordinated action across stakeholder groups. For instance, there are challenges that speak directly to parent education topics that can be introduced or expanded in parent education programs. These include information about good parenting practices, in particular screen time. However, another challenge is providing a more accessible way for parents to know their options within [the city]. These challenges may have solutions that can be planned for and resolved within [the city].

As identified in the challenges, it is clear that [the city] has a wealth of resources and opportunities available to families, but unfortunately families have a difficult time seeking out these resources successfully.

Though [one Program] is a great source of information, our interviews demonstrated that parents really leaned on relationships with community members in order to find sources of support. [the Organization] may want to think more about how to incentivize relationships between providers. When parents find themselves in contact with one source of support, receiving personalized referrals to other organizations or workshops will increase the likelihood that they can take advantage of other parent engagement activities.

Perhaps unexpected, the top three challenges that most of our interviewees mentioned were challenges that require broader reform. Housing and childcare affordability are the main difficulties facing parents in [the city] and lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness are difficulties facing the stakeholders that work with families in [the city]. These are all issues that require change across stakeholder groups as opposed to a program specific solution. Our analysis of the interviews showed us that while there is some improvements to be made regarding parent education, there are larger challenges facing parents that need to be resolved in order for parents to benefit from parent education programs.

Specifically, our interviews pointed to a lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of providers. The survey showed that the majority of workshops offered to [local] families were offered primarily in English and that most were facilitator-led rather than peer-led. One of the things that could help close opportunity gaps for families is for providers to expand the languages offerings for workshops and to look into how they can build the capacity of parents to lead workshops themselves. Having peers direct these workshops may help parents feel more comfortable and welcomed into these spaces, especially for people of color or immigrants.

6 Conclusion

Understanding the existing landscape of parent engagement activities in [the city] and the gaps that still exist is important for the city to consider as it continues to strive for high-quality education and care for all children. While many of the current resources that exist in [the city] seem to be aligned with stakeholders' perceived needs of parents, more attention must be paid to the context surrounding these current parent engagement activities: Who is leading them? Do all parents have access to this activity, in terms of language, location, child care considerations? Are there any barriers to parents not being comfortable in this space? As [the Program] continues to follow through on its action plan, addressing these questions will be critical to ensuring that all families are able to take advantage of all that [the city] has to offer.

7 Appendix

7.1 Interview Protocol

Questions

1. Tell us about your role. In what capacities and to what extent do you interact with families?
2. What specific groups of parents do you serve or interact with?
3. What do you see as the most pressing challenges for parents in [the city]?
 - (a) What are the most pressing challenges specifically concerning parenting?
4. How can/does your organization help parents mitigate these challenges?
5. Do you recommend other organizations for parents to work with? What are those organizations and what is the scope of their services?
6. To what extent do you see your organization as having a role in providing support for these parents?
- Can you provide an example?
7. If you see providing parent support as your role, what would improve your ability to provide support for parents in [the city]?
8. How can we improve parenting education in [the city]? What additional parenting education topics would benefit the community you serve?
9. What lingering questions do you have regarding family engagement in the city?
10. Anything else we missed that you consider worth discussing?

7.2 Draft Letters

Hello from [the Program],

The purpose of this email is to put you in touch with [HGSE students]. They are conducting research on behalf of [the Program], which is working to create an accessible, aligned, and high quality system of care and support for [the city's] families and children from birth to 3rd grade (to read more about the work of the partnership, click [link]).

[The Program] wants to understand the needs of parents and how best to support them. The goal is to see what exists currently, identify the gaps and overlaps, and see what needs to be added or changed to better support families.

Together, we have identified various stakeholders to interview in hopes of learning more about the landscape regarding parent support. Though we know you might not work exclusively with families, we value your perspective and would like to hear from you. [HGSE students] will reach out to you in the following days to arrange a time for a brief interview (it should take no more than 30 minutes).

Thank you,

Good afternoon,

[The Program] is working to create an accessible, aligned, and high quality system of care and support for [local] families and children from birth to 3rd grade. To read more about the work of the partnership, click [link].

As part of that work the [local subcommittee] wants to understand the landscape of parenting education opportunities offered in [the city]. The goal is to see what exists currently, identify the gaps and overlaps, and see what needs to be added or changed to better support families.

In order to create an accurate inventory of current parenting education opportunities, [the Program] is asking organizations to complete the Parenting Education Opportunities in [city] Survey.

Survey link: [] For this survey, you will be asked to enter information about opportunities you have offered over the last 2 years (July 2016-June 2018) to [local] families with children birth to 3rd grade including parent-child activities, parenting workshops/trainings or parent support groups. Please complete the survey by March 23, 2018.

A member of the subcommittee will be contacting you in a few days to see if you have any questions.

We appreciate your taking the time to fill out this survey so we gather critical data to better serve the needs of families and children.

Sincerely,

7.3 Figures

Figure 4:

Q8 What is the main focus of this parenting education workshop/support group/parent-child activity? What skills do parents learn? (Check up to 5)

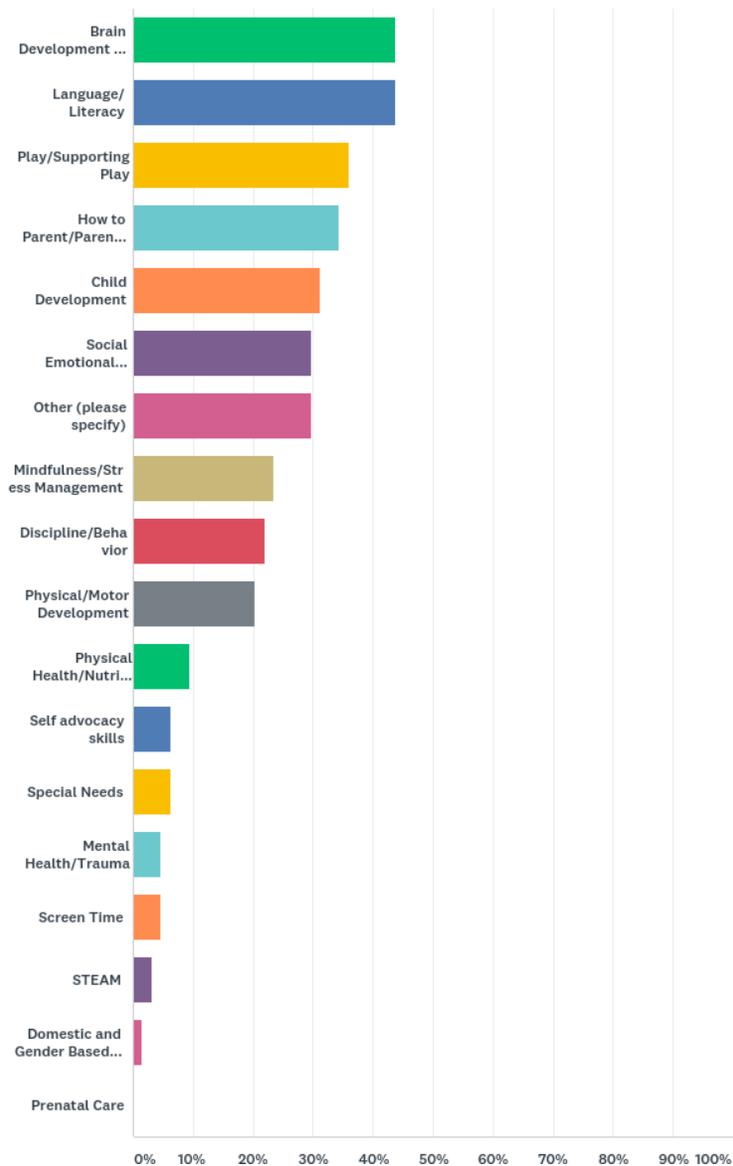


Figure 5:

Q3 Which one of the following is it?

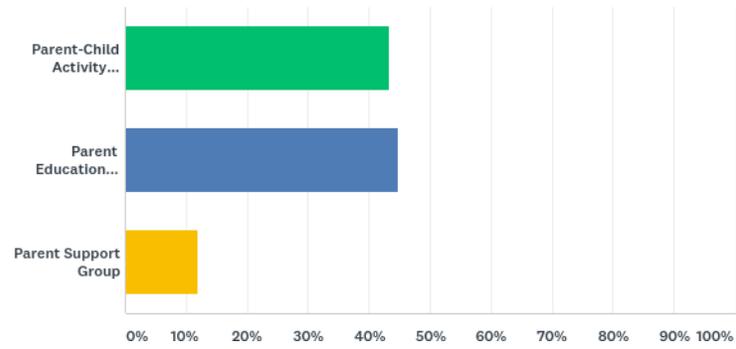


Figure 6:

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References

[1] [removed]